

## **Testimony Re: Raised Bill 1061**

### **An Act Concerning the Fiscal Sustainability of State Parks**

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Dear Members of the Environment Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of Bill 1061 which offers a number of very beneficial proposals to help strengthen the Park System. The establishment of a non-lapsing State Parks Sustainability Account will help assure that greater investments are made in CT's priceless natural assets and that parks' intrinsic and economic values will be better protected and preserved for both contemporary and future generations.

This bill does not offer one grand solution but rather a suite of new initiatives and modifications that collectively could realize a meaningful boost of funds to parks. In combination, the elements have the potential to have significant impact upon the Park System's very modest budget in coming years, but only if new revenues are truly additive. All funds accrued in a dedicated Sustainability Account should be considered supplementary to Parks' regular budgets; they should in no way be viewed as a substitute for General Fund support, nor should General Fund support be diminished in response to revenue growth in the Account. As elements of this bill's proposals involve charitable contributions from the public, every reasonable check and balance possible should be employed to assure that donations are utilized solely for the purposes for which they were given.

The opt- out \$5 charitable donation to parks included in future car registration will evoke, we believe, a pretty positive response from the public. "Asking" rather than compelling citizens to give will certainly guarantee that the already existing strong affection felt for parks will not be eroded. Friends groups well know that if engaged and educated about park needs, the public will respond with generosity, especially if confident that its gifts will not be diverted. While we wouldn't expect a 100% buy-in (that would send \$4.5 million to the Sustainability Account), perhaps CT could realize something like the 60% buy-in of Washington State's program. This would bring an additional \$2.7 million to the Park System.

Shifting control of park concessions from Rehabilitation Services to the Park System is a very welcome proposal. For decades the Park System has been denied the benefit of revenues from food service centers that in any other tourist, recreation or entertainment facility are critical to solvency.

In year 2012, Parks received only \$144,000 in concessions revenue, placing CT 39<sup>th</sup> out of 48 states generating concessions revenue. This is not an impressive return for

a System with a customer base of 8 million visitors. CT parks' percentage of revenue from concessions is 2%, less than one third the national average of 7%. While service providers in other states "provide either a flat or revenue-based fee to parks for the right to operate in state parks, BSEB operators pay no such fee. As BESB has no reporting requirement to parks, the extent of the lost revenues for parks is not known."

Not only have parks received almost no direct benefit from concessions, they have not even been credited with generating that revenue within their facilities. To offset its meager \$11.5 million budget in 2014, the Park System collected \$6.3 million in entrance and camping fees. Certainly, receipts from food concessions should be considered part of the complete picture of what Parks contribute to State coffers. Parks already operate at a bargain net cost of \$5.1 million. If food concession revenues were properly attributed to Parks, the net cost of operation would be even remarkable in its cost-effectiveness.

The Friends endorse an increase in property/building rental fees for special events. . Differentiation between in and out of state fee charges, however, may cause field staff a lot of enforcement headaches. Out of state clients will find the idea of paying a higher price for the same service offensive, badger staff members and possibly look for other venues; or those with multi-state guests lists will simply find a CT family member to sign any event contract.

All property/rental fees should continue to be deposited in the individual parks' MRI Accounts (Maintenance Repair and Improvement Accounts), as previously legislated, to assure that hosting parks may keep rented structures in proper repair.

The Friends also endorse the concept of the Sustainability Account as a repository for individual, corporate and organization donations. Care, of course, should be taken not to accept donations from entities regulated by DEEP. Standardized acknowledgement placards ideally would be gathered in a central location and not detract from the beauty of surrounding natural settings.

To ensure transparency and bolster public confidence and participation, I would suggest that the Sustainability Account be tracked online on the DEEP website. A quarterly report outlining the Account's receipts and expenditures would show citizens in what ways their contributions were directly benefiting Parks. By requiring that a regular and detailed report be made, fears about funds being diverted for purposes other than Parks betterment would be allayed. Also, if donors' names were on record, no questions about conflict of interest would arise. A small volunteer panel or board of trustees might also be considered for oversight.

Thank you so much for crafting this legislation and offering creative solutions to give the struggling beloved Park System a better chance to sustain itself in future years.

Respectfully submitted,

Eileen Grant Friends of State Parks Board of Directors